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ABSTRACT

A priori criteria are pressing playwrights to be conservative, to unify their total experience so that everything is regimented and predictable, consciously or subconsciously. The danger, joy, and mystery of life is under the aesthetic gun. Do playwrights, and theater practitioners in general, repress and thus betray their inner voices, or do they seek out the frenzy of heterotopia, which may be throbbing to be uncovered? Certainly, playwrights do not choose to write; writing chooses them. However, a writer may dig into a vein of mystery, which fringe theaters at least encourage, but even those theaters are not interested if the playwright is not a member of their inner circle. After receiving many of these types of jabs at a play's form and content, a playwright may know how to stop writing. But Utopia is found within Heterotopia, and playwrights must keep searching for it. The playwright must feel deeply and write. (RS)

HOW TO STOP WRITING:

In Search of

Heterotopia

by

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How to Stop Writing: In Search of Heterotopia

In any playwriting workshop worth its root idea, playwrights are encouraged to "trust their own material, to feed the connection between their experience and their writing," as Shepard asserts (In Shewey, pp. 123-124). Shepard completes this thought by stating, "The fact is, writers' own experience is the best thing they've got going and too often they betray that for something else" (p. 124). However, it's tough for the playwright to release the galaxies inside him when the attitudes toward the aesthetic experience, especially in America, reject free thinking, confrontation; in short, experimentation. "This is a period of slackening...From every direction we are urged to put an end to experimentation" (Lyotard, p. 71). Moreover, playwrights are too often convinced that formulas do in fact exist, that they must speak in a voice foreign to their true selves. There is always the possibility that they, some of them anyway, had nothing to say in the first place.

A priori criteria (e.g., cast and set limitations, content limitations, form limitations) are pressing playwrights to be conservative, to unify their total experience so that everything is regimented, predictable, consciously or subconsciously. The danger, joy, and mystery of life is under the aesthetic gun. Do we as playwrights, and theatre practitioners in general, repress and thus betray our inner voices, or do we seek out the frenzy of heterotopia, which may be throbbing to be uncovered in our veins? Certainly, as John Steppling posits, one doesn't choose writing,

it chooses him. However, this does not necessarily imply that once "chosen," the playwright won't take the low road to ignoring his own voice for what is deemed "acceptable," (marketable?). Moreover, one may dig into a vein of mystery, which at least fringe theatres encourage, but those theatres aren't interested, because you aren't already a part of their inner circle. So they send you a badly copied and unsigned generic letter, which states that you aren't for them. After receiving many of these types of jabs to one's form and content, one may know how to stop writing. Writing didn't choose you, it figuratively raped and literally demoralized you. Maybe, just maybe, you still have that itch. "Did you ever consider London? They like that kind of stuff over there."

It's difficult, therefore, for writers to trust what attacks their minds, to trust their exploration of what they do not have a handle on, when the attitude in the Western part of the world cannot abide by what is unquantifiable. There are good writers out there who are making truthful searches, and conveying what they have "found" in interesting forms. No one is listening. The audience mentality, which too often becomes the producer mentality, reflects the myopia of the world, a myopia which sends playwrights to teaching, landscaping, custodial services, and so on, when they should be writing. Or it sends them in search of a formula. I, personally, would rather landscape. Of course, playwrights are collectively not innocent either--there is a predominance of bad thinking, bad execution, and there are too

many excuses to not explore, to not be dangerous: "Please don't be discouraged that we cannot use your play, another theatre will have different criteria, produce it and no doubt it will be a huge success." Does "huge success," as it is used in this quote from a rejection letter mean a formula has been found? Maybe that a deep enough vein which will shed some light on humanity has been hit? Or maybe they're condescending, pure and simple. Is being "good" better than being a huge success?

The audience, for the most part, thinks it wants what is transparent. Producers need backers, and they need to make money for their backers, thus, they need an audience. What sells is what the audience wants, or at least what the marketing people tell the audience it wants.

The critics, on the other hand, most notably the majority of the New York critics, lack insight into the artistic process and product, as much as the audience does: If the play operates on any level other than the one considered normal (i.e., "safe"), the critic, who is nervous because he lacks critical handles, rejects it. Therefore, the critic, who is also willing to reject work which he feels is derivative, reinforces the attitude of "non-experimentation." I'm not really sure what you're trying to say, but it's not for us." "Your work is derivative. Anyway Sam Shepard's got the inside track [note the cliche] on the American Family territory already." "You should read Beckett, Pinter, and Ionescu, and try to learn what you're up to. You may find that what interests you as a writer has already been written." Oh,

thank you, critics for your wisdom. May God forbid anything inexplicable, or worse, another Pinter or Shepard. Is the search for the mysterious a worthy endeavor? Why should a playwright ever ask this question? "Read Pinter, et al, and stop writing." Isn't this similar to telling a young player, "Hey, you play like Willie Mays. Cut it out. We've had one already."

What concern should the playwright have for what these people think? A lot, I would say. But the playwright must ultimately listen to himself. The key group we should show concern for is the audience, but we must keep Chekhov in mind: We mustn't bring Tolstoy down to the level of the people, but we should bring the people up to the level of Tolstoy. It follows, in hypothesis anyway, that the producers will hear this cry and follow suit. The critics? They'll catch on sometime. Maybe.

How will this occur? Probably not so tough a question as when will it occur. Nonetheless, I can't answer it. All I can say is, playwrights must listen to their inner voices. Thus, it is the playwright who is responsible. "We've given you as fair of a shot as possible. Please don't be discouraged."

Hopefully, the playwright's most burning questions will remain: "How should I begin it?" "How should I end it?" "What should I title it?" Or worse--"Will I ever get another idea?" I personally don't mind losing sleep over these questions. "What is the purpose of all this?" is not a healthy question for me to ask as a playwright. At those moments, I find that what I do is my greatest enemy. "We receive over 1,500 scripts a year, so

critical comment is impossible with a limited staff." That's odd. I thought that was a critical comment. Anyway, onward toward the essence of heterotopia -- the paradox of language.

As Sontag notes, in her brilliant "The Aesthetics of Silence," art is the enemy of the artist. Art is the artists' enemy because it denies him the transcendence he desires: "The 'spirit' seeking embodiment in art clashes with the 'material' character of art itself" (In Styles of Radical Will, p.5). The playwright's medium, language, is a trap, it's gratuitous. Cursed with mediacy, a sort of second-hand blindness, the playwright seeks to overthrow the script he is writing. The playwright must seek this. The audience, the producer, the critic, and Western thought are all problematic. And, yes, so is the examination of his purpose. But once he has gotten past all this, once writing is something he must do, his drive is to overthrow his art with art. An impossibility--but he forgets that in order to listen to the true voice which speaks to him at a given moment. Therein lies a sort of madness, one which guides the playwright to new subterranean depths. "Dear Playwright, No thanks. Good luck."

"Oh, for a language to write drama in!--For a speech that is dramatic and isn't just conversation," cried O'Neill. "I'm so strait-jacketed by writing in terms of talk" (In Miller, p. 319). He recognized the impossibility, but still attempted to come face to face with a truth, a truth which demands more of an Artaudian

hieroglyphics than a common language arranged in an interesting way.

Sitting at a typewriter, lost in the world of characters that one's mind, heart, soul, imagination, powers of observation, and history have produced, and listening for the "speech" to come out as something inner, something beneath the conscious self is what the playwright does. Yet it is not done. The enemy is language, which attempts to communicate the inner hieroglyphics--the inner dancing images: Sound, emotion, supra-real moving pictures.

Language interrupts the Dionysian joy-pain, and can only suggest it within the reader or spectator, but does the playwright's consciousness of this denial of something Utopian effect his search? Language is conversation; it is not experience. The search for the voice must always come up short, because the "inner dancing images" can only be expressed in language. The signified cannot be expressed as signified; the expression of the signified is thus derivative. It cannot recreate the images, it can only suggest them. So the inner experience is fabricated.

It appears that all of this suggests that the playwright seek silence. Maybe the playwright finds that the right to speak has not been earned because there is no true freedom from what is derivative--there is no origin, just deferment. Maybe he must withdraw into a period of spiritual ripening. There are too many questions the playwright has about what to say and how to say it;

and why? So, there must be silence. As Rene' Char notes, "No bird has the heart to sing in a thicket of questions" (In Sontag, p. 7).

But if and when the self-imposed silence is lifted, then what? (It should be assumed that there is no silence in the literal sense. There is always sound. Silence can be ear-shattering, just as an empty space can resound with spectacle). There must have been a violence of the mind which has occurred. The violence of the mind may have brought light to the potential for a hieroglyphics, for the healthy state that madness can bring. The fluids of the subconscious are thus pursued without the deterring worry of the inherent inability to solidify those fluids. Moreover, standard articulation (i.e., solidification) is contrary to what is experienced within the subconscious or dream state. What is found is unfound, therefore, the self-imposed "silence" has had as its aim, the elimination of the audience from the theatre, which suggests the elimination of theatre altogether. Not a very comforting thought. But silence is not comfortable--it has been imposed due to inabilities: the inability to find a voice, to express that voice, and to accept a theatre which does not encourage the exploration of authentic voices.

Is Beckett's dream of "an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving" too demanding (In Sontag, p. 8)? It is at least elitist. I think even he is tired of pretending to "give" only because he

hasn't "said" what he has experienced at the subconscious level. The receiving half of the equation, the audience, is equally farcical because it doesn't know it should be listening with its subconscious ears, attempting to get past the sham of language as it works against itself and the subconscious. But the audience should learn to listen with the same intensity it does when discovering tragic or joyous personal truths. A thought by Krishnamúrti may help audience members and critics alike (and playwrights, too, for that matter) at least think about their theatre experiences: We must attempt to eliminate the psychological memory or else experience is closed off, as we continually hook each experience onto the last. This, of course, is just as impossible as finding a true voice and then expressing it purely.

If the playwright can out-talk language somehow, he just might arrive at a new alphabet, a dream language. But what about the old alphabet? It would have to be burned from the playwright's memory. But could it? Wouldn't the old alphabet become a palimpsest, a force under the new alphabet, thereby reducing the latter to the former. If the dream language is somehow found, against all odds, what will it say to those of us who do not possess the same alphabet? Or will it speak to the collective subconscious?

Heterotopia begins at a center, the heart, and all the roads lead inward and outward to places ultimately unknown, spilling

out blindly to no conclusion. Any language explored will be ineffable.

Utopias, as Foucault notes, permit fables and discourse; "They run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula," (Foucault, p.4) however, the road to this fantastic, untroubled dimension is chimerical. Heterotopias are lawless, incongruous, uncharted. (we can see why heterotopias are rejected in our theatres)

They are disturbing because they secretly undermine language -- common names are shattered and tangled, syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to but also opposite one another) to "hang together" (Foucault).

Whereas one might normally concur that heterotopias are a danger to the lyrical myths provided by the chimerical worlds of utopias, I think the search for heterotopia is a guide to the comprehension and thus the expansion of the worlds of myth, of fable, of utopia, which is, at its essence, "pure expression." Heterotopia is that shock of disturbance, of joy, which explodes within us. This shock is musical, it is a symphony of blood, joy, primitive range -- a pre-language symphony. It is also visual. It is Dali before paint and canvas. And we as playwrights must search for it. It is improbable we'll find it. And if we find it, who wants to hear it? Do we go on? I think any other search is false. We lie to ourselves constantly, so we must listen for our authentic selves and express it

authentically. A painful paradox. Hypocrites all of us. Aristotle, the French Academy, Sturm and Drang, Dadaists, Surrealists, and so on, you're all poor bastards.

Now what? Stop writing? Or forward to Heterotopia? What about the audience? Will it always be true that those things which push to extremes, which challenge, which provoke us to explore our inner mysteries and secrets, will attract few people, and that theatre of this kind, provided that it adheres to high critical standards, will eventually be totally disdained? Ultimately it matters. Playwrights must write, but the best are not always recognized. And? Must they? What is our goal as a theatre community? Are awards important? How many cocktail parties must we attend, how many errands must we run? How many playwrights' workshops must we attend, which are directed by half-wits who are concerned only with their personal needs? Unfortunately, I think if we have a limit, we won't be allowed to play. We might as well stop writing.

But Utopia is found within Heterotopia, I think. And playwrights must keep searching for it. The playwright must feel deeply and write. Period. If he wants to stop, if he is afraid of himself in the world, there are plenty of helpful hints above, or maybe try this: "Dear Playwright, we don't like your play and have contacted every theatre in the world and told them not to like it, too. Good luck finding a home for your work." Hey, there must be a play in that somewhere. My goodness. Maybe some of us can't stop thinking about writing anyway.

Endnotes

1. Don Shewey, Sam Shepard: The Life, The Loves Behind The Legend of a True American Original. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1985.
2. Jean Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism," The Postmodern Condition, trans. Regis Durand. University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
3. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," Styles of Radical Will. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
4. Michael Foucault, This is Not a Pipe, trans. James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California, 1983.